

## Degree attainment for African American Men 1

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Degree Attainment for African American men at flagship institutions

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## **Introduction**

The topic of African American men and college is an issue that has gained attention over a number of years. You hear more about African American men being in prisons than you do about them being in college. When you do hear about these men and college, it is often negative. The lowest numbers of college enrollment and attainment are often attributed to them along with Hispanic men. As women continue to dominate post-secondary education, African American men continue to fall behind. However, there are African American men who are able to enroll in college, even selective institutions, and complete their degree.

Flagship institutions are often known for their selectivity, high academic standards, and abundance of opportunities and resources for students. Bowen (2009) describes the unique nature of flagship institutions:

The special characteristics of the flagship universities that we study in such detail set them off in many ways from higher education in the United States viewed more broadly; they are much more selective, they enroll more students from privileged backgrounds, and they have resources far beyond what many other colleges and universities, public and private, can claim. (p. 20)

This description can explain the importance of a flagship school in the life of an African American student. These institutions have much to offer and can help a student gain access to opportunities they wouldn't normally be able to. This is especially significant for students of color who often don't have the social capital necessary in order to advance as students and future professionals.

For the African American men who enroll at these institutions, the rates are still lowest for them and they generally take longer to complete their degrees than women. According to Bowen's (2009) research on race/ethnicity at flagships:

Additionally, black and Hispanic males take the most time to graduate and are the only sub-groups in which more students graduate in five or 6 years than in four. Perhaps the single most noteworthy statistic is that only 26 percent of black males attending these leading public universities graduate within four years. (p. 46)

Although, it may take between 4-6 years, these men are defying the odds and completing their studies at these quality institutions.

With the range in time it takes from them to complete their degree, there are a number of factors to consider. The socioeconomic status of the student and the educational background of the student's parents can be predictors of a student's probability of graduating. Bowen (2009) considers that "black men who have not completed their degree requirements after four years are more likely than white men to leave school because of either inadequate financial resources of discouragement" (p. 51).

Research at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) shows us that providing students with a network of support that includes staff and faculty can be helpful. Providing experiences that focus on their particular culture and having peers similar to them can increase the chances of students having a positive experience. Bowen (2009) also suggests that "improving the first-year experiences of students from low-income families and those of black and Hispanic men may have the potential to narrow modestly-although not eliminate-disparities in graduation rates between these groups and more advantaged students" (p.56).

As these students gain their degree, they are doing it in a place that often does not want them there. Flagship institutions are often predominately white institutions (PWI's) that foster an environment that may not always be the most comfortable for students of color. The environment can often be plagued with issues of privilege, race, and the student lacking in social/cultural capital.

Fries-Britt & Turner's (2002) research on successful students at Traditionally White Institutions (TWI's) and HBCU's states that:

Conversely, Black students at TWI's are more likely to experience a disconnection between their high aspirations and their ability to be academically integrated into their institution. Research suggests that Black students at TWI's have significantly lower levels of academic integration, are less satisfied with their university, and suffer more from such interference as discrimination and inadequate study habits than White students (p. 317).

African American men entering these institutions may not have the necessary capital that their peers do to adjust to their new surroundings. Aragon (2007) believes that HBCU's offer "culturally relevant experiences that build on students' unique social capital; promoting faculty engagement with students, providing opportunities for campus activities; and preparing students for participation in a broader society that has been exclusive, indifferent, and hostile" (p. 112).

It's important to note the practices that take place at HBCU's as they offer information on the best ways to support African American students. They also show us how different sources of capital can impact these students. Having more than just a student group helps students connect to the campus as a whole and not just with other students like them. It also shows the institution's commitment to providing a variety of choices to help a student become integrated to campus life.

College preparation programs are another factor involved in degree attainment. Small and Winship (2007) suggest that "students with the adequate pre-college preparation are likely to persevere and graduate, even if they do so while experiencing greater duress, or with lower GPAs, or choosing different career paths than comparable white students" (p. 1271).

Harper (2006) believes that campus administrators should be involved in the process of improving graduation rates of black males:

A team of institutional stakeholders including, but not limited to, faculty, student affairs professionals, and black male student leaders, should be formed to develop campus-specific initiatives to improve black male retention and graduation rates. Similar to the aforementioned admissions team, these stakeholders should work collaboratively to construct a strategic plan for investigating, illuminating, and reversing problematic trends and inequitable outcomes (p.12).

I believe that campus resources such as student organizations, mentoring programs, faculty/staff involvement, and advising can help African American males attain their degree. My study will focus on purposeful campus resources and programs as a way to help these men graduate.

### **University of Illinois impact**

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) is the flagship institution for the state of Illinois. It is also a PWI, with a total undergraduate population of 29,653 (Division of Management Information). Out of the 29,653 undergraduates, 1,904 of them are African Americans, compared with 18,330 Caucasian students (Division of Management Information). Clearly, there are a small number of African American students on campus. Bowen's (2009) statistics show us that it takes these students a much longer period of time to complete their degree at flagships.

With such a small number of African American undergraduate students and the issue of degree attainment at flagships, it's important to examine the relationship between them on campus. It will be important to study this topic as a way to help African American men utilize campus

resources and attain their degree. It will also help to gain the perspective of black men on campus and how they are able to (or not) adjust to campus and college academics. It would help undergraduate advisors, faculty, and other administrators to understand the plight of students of color on this campus.

With programs like Inclusive Illinois, Illinois Promise, and the Bridge Transition Program, UIUC is trying to increase access to disadvantaged students and increase awareness of issues around race to students. Furthermore, the topic of diversity has been prominent among colleges and universities. The university would be able to audit its current practices and update them to fit the needs of this particular student demographic.

### **Proposed Research**

My research will focus on addressing how current undergraduate African American men at UIUC have been able to continue as students. I would also like to examine what the university offers that has allowed them to remain as students and get closer to receiving their degree. I would like to highlight the capital that exists on campus and to see if they are making a difference in the lives of these students.

Several resources exist on campus to serve students of color. These include the Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA), CORE (Creating Opportunities Recognizing Excellence), 100 Strong, Men of Impact, CBSU (Central Black Student Union), and the Bruce D. Nesbitt Cultural Center. In my experience on campus, female students seem to be the most involved in these organizations. Part of my questioning will center on if these opportunities are actually being used by African American men. If they aren't being used, are they using anything else? Do they have any other sources of support if they don't use campus resources? What else could be implemented that might better serve the African American men on campus?

I would also like to look at existing research to see what other campuses and/or administrators are doing to support and increase attainment for African American men. I will use current theories, practices (at PWI's and HBCU's) to explore this topic. Collectively, this work will help to shed light on the current situation at UIUC and how to increase degree attainment for these students.

One particular campus resource that will be the focus of my research is a housing group known as Men of Impact. This particular group is a central housing group for African American men that helps to address the needs, concerns, and issues facing them. They convene each week to discuss different matters, plan events for the campus, and opportunities for development as an executive board. I plan to attend one of their scheduled meetings, introduce my research, and ask if anyone would be interested in being interviewed. I would like to meet with 2-3 students for an hour and ask them specific questions about their experiences as black men working towards a bachelor's degree at UIUC.

I would like ask a number of questions with the students I interview in order to have a better understanding of their experience. These questions include:

- What has been your experience as an African American male on campus?
- Have you had any issues with academics since you've been a student here?
- What have been some of your obstacles?
- Did your parents/caregivers attend college? What was their experience?
- Were you prepped for college by family, peers, etc? (advice, tips, etc)
- How were you able to adjust to the academic standards of UIUC?
- What are the resources on campus you've taken advantage of?
- What are the most helpful resources on campus?

- Are the resources offered needed on campus?
- Are there outside resources that you use?
- Have you attended other colleges/universities? If so, why did you transfer to UIUC?
- Why did you decide to attend UIUC?
- Do you believe high school adequately prepared you for UIUC?
- What do you believe is the academic culture of black males on this campus?
- How has men of impact helped you make it in your time on campus?

If my research proposal is approved, I would like to move forward by contacting the advisors of Men of Impact to attend a meeting. If these participants are willing to be a part of my study, I would ask about possible days/times to meet. If I am able to find a time to meet with 2-3 of them, I will email each participant to confirm our meeting day. If this isn't possible I will schedule individual or 2 separate days/times to meet with them if necessary. If members of Men of Impact are not available, I would follow the same method with groups like CORE or 100 Strong.

Afterwards I would transcribe the conversations that took place during my meetings with the participants and see if any other issues in degree attainment specific to UIUC are brought to my attention. I would like to have this completed during the month of March. I will continue to gather information on my topic and sub-topics in order to complete my research.



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